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ALFRED

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It was the fourth automobile explosion in a year. . .

YOU COULD GET KILLED by JACK RITCHIE



As I stood at the checkout counter paying for pipe tobacco, I saw my car blown to smithereens.

Well, not actually smithereens. There was a tremendous flash, the automobile seemed to bulge, and then it burst into flames as the sound of the explosion reverberated over the supermarket parking lot.

It's peculiar what comes to mind at such a moment. My first thought was, Oh, Lord, I do hope my insurance covers this.

YOU COULD GET KILLED

I stood stunned and frozen, but most of the other customers poured out of the store into the lot and were joined by neighborhood residents. They converged upon the scene of the disaster and gathered within hand-warming distance of the conflagration.

The police arrived and set about the business of clearing the crowd from the immediate vicinity of the burning vehicle and maintaining a path for the anticipated fire engines.

I sighed and went outside, edging my way through the throng, seeking someone in authority.

The fire engines arrived and the fire fighters hopped off and attacked the burning vehicle with hand extinguishers. They put out the fire in a matter of seconds, but the blackened automobile was a total ruin.

A tall, middle-aged man in a dark blue suit seemed to be in command. I heard him addressed as Captain Sterling.

I listened to a uniformed officer giving him a report. "Nobody outside of the car was close enough to get hurt. Luckily the force of the explosion went mostly up."

Sterling stared at the still-smoking hulk. "That's the fourth one we've had this year. I wonder who they got this time."

An ambulance made its appearance. Several men leaped out and surveyed the ruins of the car. One of them sighed. "Well, let's get the body out. Whatever's left of it."

They approached my automobile and peered in through the broken windows, looked at each other, and retreated to Captain Sterling. "There's nobody in the car."

Sterling seemed struck with an odd thought. "Could this have been just an ordinary car fire? They happen sometimes."

The officer next to him contradicted the possibility. "No, sir. The witnesses agree there was an explosion first."

I raised my voice.

"Excuse me, sir, but I am the owner of the vehicle in question—or what remains of it."

Sterling studied me and frowned. "I never saw you before. I thought I knew everybody around here."

I exhibited my driver's license. "My name is Herbert Wilkins. I'm from Milwaukee."

He looked at, but did not touch, my wallet. "You own the car?"

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He gave the matter a bit of thought and then said, "All right, let's go."
I blinked. "Go? Where?"

"To headquarters. I've got a few questions."

"Questions?"

He smiled grimly. "Mister, people just don't have bombs planted in their automobiles for no reason. I want to find out why somebody put one in yours."

I soon found myself at police headquarters in a small room that was bare except for a table, some chairs, and a coat tree. I was left alone in the company of a man Captain Sterling had introduced as Sergeant McKeever. McKeever looked vaguely familiar.

"Really," I said, "was it necessary to take my fingerprints?"

"They're being checked out."

"Why should they have to be checked out?"

"The captain would like to be certain who you are."

I bristled. "My name is Herbert Wilkins. I teach English at a technical high school in Milwaukee."

McKeever nodded. "I know. I was one of your students."

"One of my former students? Then why didn't you tell the captain that I am who I say I am."

"I did. But the captain likes to be thorough. He wants to find out for himself."

I regarded McKeever. Yes, he was faintly familiar, but I wasn't able to place him exactly. He couldn't have been one of my A students or I would have remembered him. A students were few and far between. "So you left Milwaukee, came here, and joined the police force?"

"That's right. I was going to go to college, but some of my grades weren't good enough so I became a policeman."

"And how do you like being a policeman?"

"It's a living."

I wondered what grade I'd given him. "I can't understand what this is all about and why I was brought here."

"Things are going on in this city," McKeever said ominously. "The syndicate is moving in."

"What syndicate?"

He shrugged. "Just the syndicate. Drugs and whatever goes with it. Things are being organized. Only there are some people here who don't

YOU COULD GET KILLED

want to be organized. So we've had three cars blown up with people inside them, and another pusher got himself killed when he opened his locker at the athletic club."

"Haven't you arrested anyone?"

"We've got to have hard evidence first. All we have now is talk, and the talk is that it's the syndicate and somebody named Cornelius Vanderlaugen is in charge of the operations here."

"Surely you must have at least questioned Vanderlaugen?"

"We don't know where he is or even what he looks like. He doesn't have any kind of a record."

Captain Sterling re-entered the room. "Well, you check out. You seem to be who you say you are."

Sergeant McKeever nodded. "I guess it was just a case of mistaken identity of a vehicle. They figured you were somebody else."

The captain remained noncommittal. "What's it like teaching English in a technical high school?"

"Not very profitable. Students don't come to technical high schools to learn grammar or prose composition. If it wasn't for the fact that our school board insists on at least one year of English for each student, I doubt that I'd have more than a corporal's guard in any of my classes."

The captain smiled, but not very widely. "How do you like your teacher's pay?"

I riposted. "How do you like your policeman's pay?"

He agreed we had something in common. "Roll up your sleeves, please."

I was about to protest, but then capitulated. I took off my suitcoat and rolled up the sleeves of my shirt. "You will notice," I said, "that there are no puncture marks."

"What makes you think I'm looking for puncture marks?"

"Oh, come now. The fact that I'm a teacher of English doesn't isolate me from the rest of the world. I watch television and go to the movies—the latter very occasionally. I have, simply through existing, acquired a certain layman's knowledge of the drug traffic and its vocabulary."

Sterling watched me roll down my sleeves. "All right, so you're not an addict. Why couldn't you be a pusher?"

"I teach a full schedule and it occupies most of my time and energy. When would I have time to push dope?"

"How about on the weekends? If you live and teach in Milwaukee, why are you here today?"

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"To see the college football game. I'm an alumnus, you know. Our team has had some bad years, but I think we're about to burst into mediocrity."

"Could I see your ticket to the game?"

"It was in the glove compartment of my car. I'm afraid it must have burned."

"Along with everything else?"

A bit of my temper escaped. "Of course along with everything else! That would include six pounds of pure heroin with a street value of ninety million dollars. It was wrapped in brown paper and fastened with a blue string!"

Sergeant McKeever chuckled appreciatively. "Where did you get the blue string?"

Sterling changed course. "Do you have any enemies? Anyone who might want you dead? Relatives? Wife?"

"I'm single and blessed with a dearth of relatives. As far as I know, I haven't an enemy in the world. At least not anyone who would go to the extreme of trying to murder me."

"Who knew you'd be in town today?"

"I may have mentioned it to one or more of my colleagues at school."

Sterling saw a possibility. "Putting a bomb together would take a little knowhow. Something you might find in a technical school. How do you get along with your colleagues? Especially the ones who teach the technical subjects?"

"Absolutely capital. We regard each other with the utmost condescension."

Sterling remained thoughtful. "Sergeant McKeever tells me he was in one of your English classes. He says you had some kind of a quota system. You always failed twenty percent of your classes."

"Nonsense. I had no such quota. It's sheer coincidence that the failure rate consistently hovered around that mark."

Sergeant McKeever seemed eager to make amends for the accusation. "My kid brother Albert is in one of your classes right now."

Of course. Albert McKeever did look somewhat like the sergeant. He was a bright enough student in technical subjects, I supposed, but English was a lost region. He was no behavior problem in my class because I enforce a rather rigid discipline, but I had heard that he'd once been suspended for tossing a rheostat at his shop instructor.

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Captain Sterling turned to McKeever. "How's your brother doing?"

McKeever sighed. "All right, except for English. I guess he's going to get a D like I did. Or maybe even an F."

Sterling turned back to me. "How long have you been teaching?"

"More than twenty years."

"And how many students have passed through your hands during that time?"

"I have no exact idea. Perhaps thousands."

Sterling fed his idea. "You don't suppose that one of them, maybe one of those in the twenty percent you failed, would carry a grudge?"

"Ridiculous. I wouldn't consider the idea for a moment."

Neither would Sergeant McKeever. "I don't think any of Mr. Wilkins' students would try to kill him. He was strict and a hard marker, but fair. We always thought of him as a father figure—you know—stern, but still liking you. Besides, Captain, we couldn't question thousands of former students. We don't have that kind of manpower."

Captain Sterling agreed. "I guess you're right, Sergeant. Now if Mr. Wilkins had been killed, that would be a different story. We could get an emergency appropriation and dispatch more people to Homicide. But he isn't dead, not even hurt. There really isn't much we can do right now. Unless something else turns up, of course, like his being killed the next time."

He was ready to dismiss me. "We'll keep in touch with you."

Sergeant McKeever escorted me downstairs. "Now you take care of yourself," he said in parting.

I took a taxi to the bus depot and a bus from there to Milwaukee. Once home, I phoned my auto-insurance agent and gave him the news of the destruction of my car.

Then I made myself a drink.

Yes, I'm a teacher of English and I thoroughly enjoy my job. Even in a technical high school. I'm also a teacher of English who has \$400,000 in Costa Rican banks and nearly that much in the Bahamas.

My phone rang early that evening. It was Cornelius Vanderlaugen. "I just heard the news. What the hell happened?"

"Damned if I know. It was an accident."

"I hope you've got some more of those contraptions?"

"I put another one together this afternoon. I'm renting a car and driv-

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ing back tonight. Everything will go off as scheduled. You know I guarantee my work."

"Well, be careful how you handle those things. You could get yourself killed."

"I know." I hung up.

Tomorrow morning, at 3 A.M., one Ed Jansen, a man too stubborn to see the wisdom of going along with the syndicate, would presume himself safe in his bed. He would be wrong. The explosive device I would plant between the basement joists directly under that bed would send him to Kingdom Come.

What had gone wrong with the first bomb? I rather suspected the timer. They can be temperamental. Perhaps it had been accidentally activated when I drove my car over a pothole. And it had ticked merrily away in the glove compartment, finally detonating the bomb while I was in the supermarket.

Or had I just gotten careless? Perhaps it was time to retire and go abroad. I certainly had enough money.

I pondered.

A father figure? Really? Strict, but fair? Stern, but liking? Was that how my students thought of me? I had never suspected.

Well, perhaps I would teach just a *few* more semesters before I called it quits.

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